

Mercury:

Your Environment

It's In Your Environment . . .

Oil refineries, incinerators, coal-fired power plants, and other industries release mercury into the environment. Mercury from broken fever thermometers, hospital waste and dental waste also pollutes the environment and contaminates waterways, soil, fish and other wildlife.

It's In Your Food . . .

Pregnant women and women hoping to become pregnant should not eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel or tilefish. These fish species contain enough mercury to increase the risk of nervous system damage in infants and the fetus.

—Food and Drug Administration (FDA), January 2001

One in ten women of childbearing age risk having children with impaired nervous systems due to mercury exposure in the womb.

—Centers for Disease Control (CDC), March 2001

The National Research Council estimates 60,000 babies are born each year at risk of nervous system defects and learning disabilities because their mothers eat contaminated fish—an otherwise healthy food.



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Your Food

Your Health



It Affects Your Health . . .

Thermometers

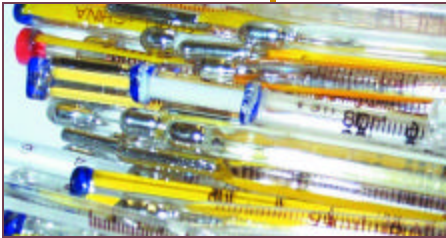
Mercury thermometers, found in many family medicine cabinets, are made of glass and contain a silvery-white liquid metal. If a mercury thermometer breaks, it can seriously threaten our environment and health.

For example, if the mercury from one fever thermometer finds its way into a waterway, **it is enough to contaminate all of the fish in an entire 20-acre lake.**

When the mercury found in fever thermometers is exposed to air, it forms a vapor that is easily inhaled.

Symptoms of acute exposure can include numbness around the mouth, tunnel vision, tingling fingers and toes. Prolonged, high-level exposure can cause neurological and kidney damage, vision problems, and behavior abnormalities.

Usually, breaking one thermometer will not harm your health if the spill is properly cleaned. Remove contaminated carpeting and never use a vacuum to clean mercury. Open windows to air out the area, and call the county health hazardous materials division for advice. **Exposures to mercury vapor from broken thermometers are preventable by using a safe alternative**, such as a digital, dot matrix or gallium thermometer.



Thermometers are the single largest source of mercury in household waste.

Contaminated Fish

People can unknowingly expose themselves to dangerous levels of mercury by eating fish—an otherwise healthy food.

All mercury, whether from industrial sources, medical and dental waste, or broken thermometers can enter our environment and migrate to rivers, lakes and the ocean. In water, it is converted to highly toxic methyl mercury and then absorbed by fish.

Data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, FDA and CDC suggest an alarming relationship between eating fish containing high amounts of methyl mercury and birth defects. **Pregnant women exposed to high levels of methyl mercury could have babies with vision problems, learning disabilities, or impaired nervous system development.**

Serious concern has been raised by consumer and public health groups regarding methyl mercury levels detected in tuna. Virtually every can of tuna is contaminated to some degree, and unsafe mercury levels have been reported in tuna steaks. Women of childbearing age should limit tuna consumption to about 7 ounces (about 1 can) per week. Children should only be allowed 3 ounces per week—about one sandwich.



Toxic methyl mercury is stored in fish tissue and eaten by humans.

How To Protect Yourself

According to the FDA and EPA, pregnant women and women who may become pregnant **should not eat:**

swordfish

tilefish

shark

king mackerel

There is also concern about high levels of mercury detected in other kinds of fish. Although the FDA and EPA do not list these fish as unsafe to eat, many public health experts and organizations have expressed concern about the following species:

sea bass

red snapper

marlin

largemouth bass

tuna—canned and especially tuna steaks

It is also very important not to use mercury thermometers. Mercury thermometers can pose an immediate health threat if they break, and can also pollute waterways and fish if they are thrown away. Be sure to replace all mercury thermometers in your home with safe alternatives.

Do not throw them away. Bring mercury thermometers to a household hazardous waste facility or roundup, or turn them in at a local exchange event for an alternative.

Make sure you are taking care of your health and the health of your family—don't use mercury thermometers and pay attention to what kinds of fish are safer to eat.